CAREFREE CHRISTIANITY
Matthew 6:24-34
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better for 6:19-24

Sometimes we are so consumed by worrying about the future and planning for the future, that the joys of the present moment go sailing by unexperienced and almost unnoticed. Ernest Campbell tells about the time he first attended a double header, and how at the end of the first inning he began to worry about the fact that the long-awaited experience was 1/18th over. Campbell unlocked a whole bank of similar memories with that observation: my awakening to the esoteric joys of baseball, my total absorption in the nuances of the game at the age of ten, the promise of a train ride to Pittsburgh to see the then lowly Pirates and the Brooklyn Dodgers, terrors of the National League, that remarkable assemblage of individuals eulogized in Roger Kahn's The Boys of Summer, the incessant worrying about the possibility of rain and the worthlessness of a raincheck when one lives a hundred miles away. And finally the day arrived, and we were there, Forbes Field and my beloved Pirates, and one of the sharpest memories is the anxiety of a small boy sensing that the game was proceeding and soon would be over. Joy, but joy tarnished by the relentless passing of time, joy tarnished by anxiety.

Human beings are worriers and planners. It is one way to define the difference between us and the rest of the created order. The rest of the animal kingdom is blissfully and marvelously unaware of past or future and thus incapable of anxiety. If you are a dog everyday is forever, every meal a gift, every new moment an opportunity for joy. But we know - and we worry and we spend a lot of our time planning. The preacher is always addressing himself in his sermons: I present a fairly large target for this subject. I love to plan: I worry a lot: what's going to happen tomorrow, next week, next year - occupies a lot of my imagination and thinking. Sometimes it drives my family to distraction.

There are two results of our inherent propensity to worry: one good, one not so good. To worry about the future and to plan for it is at least to have a chance to do with it what one wants to do. Planners and worriers get things accomplished. The other result is not so positive. Planners and worriers are so busy planning that there is no space in life for spontaneity, serendipity, sudden and surprising joy. I confess my sin. Unscheduled joy has to work hard to find time and space to surface - but when it does I am always profoundly grateful. Worriers miss a lot and I worry about that too. Many of us walk through life like that special breed of tourist who is so busy snapping pictures of the Grand Canyon to show the neighbors next February, that he misses entirely the experience of the Grand Canyon. Langdon Gilkey, one of my favorite theologians writes: "Western culture has so emphasized work for the future as the center of meaning in life that the value of being in the present has almost totally vanished. The great middle class, especially its executive and professional leaders - even those who comment learnedly of this theme- find it almost impossible just to 'be' and merely enjoy some aspect of their present being: food, talk, beauty, sleep, rest or love. For many of us all meaning involves activity that builds something to be enjoyed at some future time." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.338). Once Jesus said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink...Look at the birds of the air...consider the lilies...do not be anxious about tomorrow."

That sounds like a pleasant but essentially harmless platitude, doesn't it? - read by the preacher on occasion, from the pulpit which is to say six feet off the ground and twenty-five miles from the realities of life in this world. It is, I would suggest, - given its hallowed status as part of the Sermon on the Mount, - one of

the most difficult texts for middle-class Americans to handle honestly, without any fingers crossed. Surely He was kidding, or at least speaking metaphorically. Surely He can't have meant it literally.

Our problems with the text begin with a bit of a mistranslation. Most of us were brought up with the King James Version, and no matter how long we read and hear recent translations the older words are burned into our minds. "Take no thought for tomorrow" is how we learned it and remember it: uncompromising, unlikely, unrealistic and inaccurate. The Greek is better translated: "Do not be anxious." There is, it seems to me, a significant difference between not thinking about tomorrow and not being anxious. The sense of it is, "do not be distracted by your anxieties: do not become the slaves of your worrying and planning." The key is in the short paragraph which precedes it: "you can't serve God and mammom." For now, understand that we're dealing with deep, obsessive anxiety, not the normal concern about what's for dinner tonight.

Oversimplification is a danger here! Jesus was not describing God's providence as a daily basket of food delivered at the doorstep. He was not inveighing against owning property or working hard. His father owned a carpenter shop - He was the heir and in all probability owned it and worked in it. "Look at the birds", He said, and if we do that empirically, objectively, several observations ought to jump out at us. For one thing, birds are rather busy little creatures, devoting every waking hour to providing for themselves. They may not be fretting about paying the gas bill next month, but they are not unconcerned about dinner and a place to spend the night. For another thing, a lot of them starve and freeze to death precisely because they're not smart enough to plan ahead. For a final thing, we are not birds. We can't control the fact that we know a secret they don't; namely, that there will be a tomorrow.

What the text does say, loudly and clearly, is that life as a follower of Jesus Christ is a new and different life. What it does say is that we don't have to be slaves of our anxieties: that full life is freedom from a deep anxiety about the future which can, and does, rob every present moment of meaning and joy. What it suggests is that while we may not bow down to stone idols any longer, we have a way of shoving God out of the center of life and replacing Him with a pagan image - like security of money or power. (That's what mammon is). What the text says is that we rob ourselves of our own humanity when that happens - and that Jesus Christ offers to give it back if we'll take Him a little seriously.

Anxiety, which Webster defines as "painful uneasiness over an impending or anticipated ill" is a very real thing. Anxiety is fear that doesn't know what to be afraid of. We are anxious because time is passing: we are anxious about the thought of death: we are anxious because there is a lot about life that tells us we don't amount to much, that we are insignificant, that there is not lasting meaning to our lives.

To be anxious is part of what it means to be human, but it seems that anxiety in our day has become epidemic. In literature, the writers whose insights have punctuated the middle of twentieth century have concluded that anxiety is the primary reality of our age. W.H. Auden wrote a poem entitled "The Age of Anxiety." Listen to a few lines:

"We move on
As the Wheel wills; one revolution
Registers all things, the rise and fall
In pay and prices....

"...this stupid world where
Gadgets are gods and we go on talking,
Many about much, but remain alone,
Alive but alone, belonging - where? -
Unattached as tumblewood."

Anxiety about nonbeing entered human consciousness with a new reality after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And, in the meantime, the individual got caught up and was reduced to nothing by the very bigness and depersonalization of the structures he had created. Franz Kafka wrote a brilliant novel called The Castle, in which the main character spends his whole life trying to contact the authorities in the castle who control life in the village - and fails.

We have learned to live with a lot of amorphous, unfocused anxiety. We have learned to live with threats to our lives, the older threats of hunger and cold, and the newer threats of nuclear warfare, depersonalization and loneliness. We have elevated security to the throne of grace: the intensely significant task of nailing down once and for all the guarantee that there will be a comfortable tomorrow for ourselves and our families.

We are privileged, in this nation, in this generation, never to have known the threat of mass starvation, or invasion by an enemy. But anyone who lived through the great depression, or knows anything about it, has a name for the enemy at the gate. The name is "financial instability". And now we're talking about mammon. Mammon is whatever we will give our lives to, in order to guarantee our future security.

"When E.F.Hutton speaks everybody listens." And when the market behaves erratically and the dollar loses more ground to the yen we experience something more than nervousness, something akin to existential dread. All our tomorrows, the totality of our warfare against the passing of time, our concern for food and drink and clothing and the whole future is tied up right there. And when there are hints that whole structure might come crashing down we feel deep and profound anxiety.

How else to comprehend the unspeakable tragedy in Guyana last week? Demented and tortured people found a kind of sick security in the rigid authorizationism of Jonesville. And when the structure began to shake and come apart at the seams they showed themselves capable of murder and mass suicide. All the meaning their poor lives ever had was given by that structure, and without it, there was nothing left. Whatever else it is, that terrible sequence of events is an illustration of the intensity of the human need for security.

For most of us, however, security is frankly, a materialistic, financial phenomenon. It is our fortress against the threats of hunger and cold. As such it makes sense: it is not evil in itself. But at some point it becomes mammon - the deity in whose service we gladly give our lives. Gilkey surprised me by suggesting that most human behavior is an acting out of our anxiety. He writes: "We seek the power to guarantee for the infinite future the job or the status that gives us that

security, and so our search for power takes on the strange character of infinity." (ob.cit., p. 322).

Politicians and soldiers are free to do it openly. Hitler promised a "Thousand Year Reich" and if you want to see it in battle dress watch Patton next week. Gilkey observes that business men, clergy and professors all engage in political maneuvering to defend our job, career, or at least our name - the source of our meaning, our guarantee of security.

But it doesn't work. Idolatry never does. Because the threat is ultimate, our need for security is infinite. The wealthy man always needs more. The materialist will always need the latest gadget. The professor, one more monograph for his shelf, and the clergyman one more sermon to end all sermons. And the nation?

How many nuclear devices will it take to guarantee our security? Does anyone seriously propose that it is ever possible? Is there anyone who seriously believes that another several billion dollars will do it? Of course not. It doesn't work that way. The god of security is infinitely demanding. He will not be satisfied. You cannot serve God and mamman.

And so we come finally to a point of decision - which is where Jesus wanted us to be in the first place. You can't be a free person and a slave at the same time. You must choose - who and what you will be.

Thanksgiving is several days gone but the best part of the Pilgrim story is here. They worried and planned, and it's a good thing that they did. But had their ultimate concern been security they would never have left England. They trusted God. In a way so simple that we have trouble comprehending it, they believed that God would stand with them and provide for them. Not without their energy and work and planning, to be sure. But at some point each one of those intrepid souls had a moment of decision - God or mammon: the future of freedom or the security of the present.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's word for us today, is that in Him we are already safe. Our future is secure. We are free - from the anxiety about time, free from the threat of death or nonbeing. Free to live our lives, this moment, this glorious day, for its own sake and none other. We are free in Jesus Christ to enjoy being human and alive in 1978; free to enjoy the fruit of our labor; free to live joyfully and openly because we are safe.

Having heard me say the words, wouldn't you give anything to be that way - to be that free? Isn't there something deep within each one of us that longs to be that kind of men and women? Well, the news is that it's right in front of us: for the taking. But we can't have it both ways. We can't compromise at this point. We can't serve two masters. We can't keep living out of our anxiety and then turn to God once a week or so and expect everything to feel all right. We can't devote every waking moment to making time stand still, or to accumulating symbols of our immortality and expect an occasional hour in worship to transform us into carefree Christians.

That happens deeply, profoundly - when we put everything in perspective of the God who created us and redeemed us and promised to care for us: that is to say, when we accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ and receive from Him the life He wants us to live: when we seek, first, His kingdom and He becomes master of our lives, our possessions, our time.

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

That is the promise - and that, I would suggest, is very good news indeed.

Amen.

Our Father, we confess that we have tried very hard to nail down our security. We confess that it has been illusive and that we haven't succeeded. Open us now, to the suggestion that You are the only security we need. And give us,each, the courage to decide this day to love You and serve You and seek your Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.